

A Shrink Looks at SCUBA



David F. Colvard, M.D., is a private psychiatrist and clinical investigator in Raleigh NC, and a divemaster. He hosts www.DivePsych.com which provides evidence-based information for divers on psychological and stress factors in scuba divers. □



Peer Pressure, or Disappear Pressure?

Most of us have had the experience of being on a dive boat, or standing at water's edge, with a buddy who turns to us at the last minute and suggests that we do something marginally appropriate – photograph each other jumping in full scuba gear off Oil Slick Leap, or going down to the bottom of the reef “just for a minute.” At those moments we are subjected to “peer pressure” which is the social leverage that we feel when someone pushes us to behave in one direction or another.

Usually, if we feel a good connection and a sense of balance with the other person (or persons) we are able to have our judgment override the social pressure – “No, David, I’m not diving five hours before we have to fly back!” But sometimes, particularly when we are feeling a need to prove ourselves or need a sense of approval, it becomes more difficult.

Typically, when people think of peer pressure, they are referring to the influence exerted on an individual to engage in “anti-social” (BAD!) behaviors. Peer pressure is often cited as the culprit in smoking, drinking, drug use, dangerous sexual behaviors and eating fast food. But, there are also “pro-social” (GOOD) forms of peer pressure.

For instance, good pressure includes dive buddies or groups who insist on consistent use of precautionary decompression (safety stops), have good reef hygiene, and observe good hydration. The pressure exerted by the group has often made me a safer and more ecologically friendly diver than I might have otherwise been.

An online survey done by David Colvard, MD in 2004 found that 4% of women divers (of 413 female divers polled) and 2% of male divers (out of 1415 male divers polled) had experienced a negative encounter with peer pressure. Most of these experiences fit the “Hey, let’s...” category, where a buddy (or a group of buddies) pressures someone into taking part in a dive-related activity that was marginal or worse.

The data suggested that for men, the pressure seemed to be related to competition. But for women it was related to pressure to accompany their dive buddy on an activity that the buddy was already comfortable with. These last interpretations are largely speculative, but do make sense.

How should you deal with peer pressure to engage in risky activity? Probably the best advice is to dive regularly with a buddy with whom you are comfortable, and who dives at about your skill level. If you are very inexperienced, then diving with or near a divemaster is probably the best idea anyway. If you find yourself having regular concerns in this area (or haven’t yet found a set of good dive buddies), taking part in professionally organized activities is a good idea. Dive professionals will insist on things like good reef hygiene, safety stops, and good dive profiles.

If you are a woman who has been introduced to diving by a male partner who frequently presses you to move beyond your level of comfort, consider finding another partner with whom to dive, or suggest that your partner dive with another aggressive diver. Several years ago I came to Bonaire with my wife (who had become pregnant just before the trip) and another couple. He and I dove often and enthusiastically, sometimes by ourselves and sometimes with his wife. My wife and I took frequent snorkels on that trip (1000 Steps was her favorite) and everyone was happy. I have another dive buddy (who shall remain nameless, although his name usually appears on this column) who has a hard time finding buddies who will dive frequently enough to satisfy him and whose wife often refuses to accompany him when he goes on dive trips!

In reality, peer pressure in diving is similar to the effect that most people feel about drinking, smoking, and eating hamburgers. The final answer is always, “Get better peers.” □ *By Guest Shrink, Robert Mankoff, Ph.D., Medical University of the Americas, Nevis. Photos from David Colvard, M.D*